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Rule of St Benedict — Chapter 7

on

Humility

In today’s world of independence, self-development, and assertiveness, of ambition, competition and rivalry, St Benedict’s chapter on Humility seems to have no place, with its fearing a God who is ever watching, with its not doing our own will, nor following our own longings, with its enduring hard, unpleasant, and even unjust things, with its confessing bad thoughts to our superior, and its seeing our self as incompetent, unworthy, and of least importance, with its humble posture and downcast eyes — all the things we want to have no part of.

For Nietzsche, humility is the great lie of the weak that cunningly transforms cowardice into apparent virtue. For Freud, humility is a form of masochistic guilt complex. For Adler, humility runs close to a feeling of inferiority. These cover the more modern attitudes towards humility.

However, Early Christian Tradition accorded humility a more eminent place: it was seen to be absolutely fundamental for the spiritual path. The Desert Mother Theodora said, “It is neither asceticism nor vigils, nor any other work that saves us; only sincere humility.” Similarly Isaac the Syrian: “Without even works, humility obtains pardon . . . but without humility works are of no profit.” Cassian saw it as the gift of our Saviour, and mother of all the virtues. Pseudo Macarius saw it as the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

What happened, what went wrong? In trying to express humility’s absolute primacy within a Christian ethic, as Christianity moved into the wider non-Jewish world, Tradition borrowed terms from pagan moral philosophy — in the migration humility lost something in the translation. To get a feel for what happened let us look at Origin who sought to place humility within the framework of virtues as outlined by the ancient philosophers. He claimed to recognise humility in ‘metriotes’ or ‘measure’, which became in Latin the word for ‘moderation’: ‘mediocritias,’ and from which we get, of course, ‘mediocrity’. We can see here how moderation/moderate, a good thing, is tilted towards mediocrity/mediocre, which is poorer. Ultimately humility and humiliation became confused, and so eventually humility was discarded. This is not what the early Church had in mind.

So, to go back before this. Our Original Temptation, as portrayed in the Book of Genesis, is that “You will be like gods.” (Genesis 3:5) Prior to this story of The Fall, we were told that the human was created “in the image of God.” (Genesis 1:27) This temptation, then, may be thought of as a way to short-circuit the process of our becoming like God — much as the Beatles tried to short-circuit their way into mysticism through the use of psychedelic drugs. There are no shortcuts; things take as long as they take. Shortcuts only abuse; they cause some damage. Here, in the Genesis story, in our newfound ‘god-likeness’ we became arrogant: “What need have I of God? I don’t need anyone; I can do what I like!” This alienation from God ultimately manifested itself in not only our alienation from the world (“Accursed be the soil because of you. With suffering shall you get your food from it everyday of your life.”), but more importantly, in an alienation from even our closest neighbour (“You shall yearn for your husband, yet he will lord it over you.”). This is our world! We can now begin to see some sense in Jesus’ words: “You know that among the pagans the rulers lord it over them, and the great among them make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you. No; anyone who wants to be great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be your slave.” (Matthew 20:25-27.) Jesus’ remedy for human arrogance is humility. For humility is the basis for right relationships — right relationships with our neighbour, with our world, with our God. Its promise is peace — peace with ourselves, peace with our world, and peace with our God. This we all want; this is why humility matters.

To recover the early Church’s teaching on humility, I turn to early monastic teaching — as preserved and handed on to us in the Rule of St Benedict. There are, of course, more ancient sources. Being a follower of St Benedict, it is Benedict’s distillation of early tradition that I turn to; it is this I seek to understand. His Chapter on humility, the longest in his short
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Rule, comes largely from The Master who in turn depended on Cassian. Much of Benedict’s language on humility contains expressions which are culturally conditioned, and which must be re-expressed in terms more accessible to modern readers, if we are to appreciate the early teaching on humility.

Holy Scripture, brethren, cries out to us saying, “Everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted.” In saying this it shows us that all exaltation is a kind of pride, against which the Prophet proves himself to be on guard when he says, “Lord, my heart is not exalted, nor are my eyes lifted up; neither have I walked in great matters, nor in wonders above me.” But how has he acted? “Rather have I been of humble mind than exalting myself; as a weaned child on its mother’s breast, so You solace my soul.”

Hence, brethren, if we wish to reach the very highest point of humility and to arrive speedily at that heavenly exaltation to which ascent is made through the humility of this present life, we must by our ascending actions erect the ladder Jacob saw in his dream, on which the Angels appeared to him descending and ascending. By that descent and ascent we must surely understand nothing else than this: that we descend by self-exaltation and ascend by humility. And the ladder thus set up is our life in the world, which the Lord raises up to heaven if our heart is humbled. For we call our body and soul the sides of the ladder, and into these sides our divine vocation has inserted the different steps of humility and discipline we must climb.

Benedict’s reference to Jacob’s Ladder (Genesis 28:12) is his image of the spiritual journey — it connects earth and heaven in the NOW: it is a way, a means, a process, of achieving the presence of God in THIS world; it is a way of not only letting God come down, but also allowing ourselves go up.

Benedict speaks of this ladder as being our life in this world, with its sides being our body and soul. We are embodied spirit; we are body AND spirit. We are not a spirit trapped in a body, so that what we seek, then, is liberation from the body. We are not seeking to get rid of our body; such is only the way of self-destruction (one need only think of the anorexic to see the truth of this). If this were the case, to use Benedict’s image, it would be like having a ladder with only one side! Rather, in this world our body is the manifestation of our spirit; we cannot exist without it; we need a body — our ladder has to have two sides. The two are connected. A malaise in our spirit is felt in our body; if our body is unwell it will affect our spirit. We all self-reject to some degree (the whole cosmetics industry trades on this); there are bits of our self, either spiritual or physical, that we don’t like — these we seek to hide, alter, or camouflage. Our life’s journey, then, may be thought of as our way of coming to terms with this alienation we feel towards our self, towards our body/soul, our climbing the ladder as our integration of the two — we need to do this to come to peace with ourselves.

We see success in terms of getting ahead, being on top, winning, owning, having, consuming, controlling. Benedict challenges this by saying we go up by going down and we go down by going up. For Benedict, More is not Better; rather, More is Less. Benedict wants to lead us to a place where we can be happy with less, happy being less, where we are freed from having to be More. What has happened is that we have learnt to experience our sense of self in terms of what we DO, and we have learnt to find our meaning in what we do. Our being, our BE-ing, is no longer good enough; we no longer see ourselves as precious, sacred, just in our self. We have to be More than we are — which, of course, is pride; we are taught to be proud. We Have to be successful; we Have to achieve; we Have to acquire and accumulate — anything else is to be a failure, not good enough. And we are all given an ideal (that against which we can measure our performance) of what it means to be successful; we are taught we have to be like. This keeps us striving to be like that; we can never be secure, for there is always
more to be had. Life becomes characterised by hurriedness, busy-ness, agitation — no peace here. Like all ideals, this one, too, is unattainable. Being More is not a recipe for happiness, but for insanity: I have to be perfect (that is, having more), but I am not perfect, so I have to try harder — but no matter how hard I try, I will never be perfect. So I am always self-rejecting. So do I start to feel ashamed of myself. Our inability to live with ourselves sees us treating ourselves and others harshly. In having to acquire more, to be more, we feel stressed and pressured. As this builds, to cope, to relieve the pressure, we start to compensate in some way — substance abuse, workaholism, pornography, … whatever. All of these distract us from how we feel, and so we become numbed, unconscious. Sadly all this just feeds into our poor sense of self, and so it goes on.

We need to get off this merry-go-round. So Benedict says to us: more is less; less is more. He is inviting us to find our way to where we can just be ourselves, and appreciate ourselves just for who we are: sacred, precious, valued, cherished, unique, esteemed and worthy, gifted, graced, blessed — awesome in fact! Instead of being not good enough, we have to learn to see ourselves as just different to one another: I have this talent (that another may or may not have) but not that one, I excel in this but not in that, and come to accept that it's OK to be different. Then I can just note our differences and acknowledge our limitations, without having to take the next step to a judgement that is harsh — judgement against ourselves (I am no good); judgement against another (You are not good enough). In this place of being, as opposed to doing, we learn gentleness, simplicity and humility; only here can we come to feel in awe of who we really are. This is where Benedict is calling us.

Our self rejection, “I am not good enough” [as I wrote this, I noticed that what I had typed was: 'I am not god enough'! Captures it perfectly, really; it throws us back to our original temptation and points to why we went down that track], we project onto others. We judge others. We experience them judging us. It’s a harsh world. All this we project onto God. So we come to our first step on Benedict’s Ladder of Humility.

The first degree of humility, then, is that a person keep the fear of God before his eyes, and beware of ever forgetting it. Let him be ever mindful of all that God has commanded; let his thoughts constantly recur to the hell-fire which will burn for their sins those who despise God, and to the life everlasting which is prepared for those who fear Him. Let him keep himself at every moment from sins and vices, whether of the mind, the tongue, the hands, the feet, or the self-will, and check also the desires of the flesh. Let a man consider that God is always looking at him from heaven, that his actions are everywhere visible to the divine eyes and are constantly being reported to God by the Angels.

This is what the Prophet shows us when he represents God as ever present within our thoughts in the words “Searcher of minds and hearts is God,” and again in the words “The Lord knows the thoughts of men.” Again he says, “You have read my thoughts from afar,” and, “The thoughts of men will confess to You.” In order that he may be careful about his wrongful thoughts, therefore, let the faithful brother say constantly in his heart, “Then shall I be spotless before Him, if I have kept myself from my iniquity.”

As for self-will, we are forbidden to do our own will by the Scripture, which says to us, “Turn away from your own will,” and likewise by the prayer in which we ask God that His will be done in us. And rightly are we taught not to do our own will when we take heed to the warning of Scripture: “There are way which to men seem right, but the ends of them plunge into the depths of hell”; and also when we tremble at what is said of the careless: “They are corrupt and have become abominable in their wills.” And as for the desires of the flesh, let us believe with the Prophet that God is ever present to us, when he says to the Lord, “Every desire of mine is before You.”
We must be on our guard, therefore, against evil desires, for death lies close by the gates of pleasure. Hence the Scripture gives this command: Go not after your concupiscences.” So therefore, since the eye of the Lord observes the good and the evil and the Lord is always looking down from heaven on the children of men “to see if there be anyone who understands and seeks God,” and since our deeds are daily, day and night, reported to the Lord by the Angels assigned to us, we must constantly beware, brethren, as the Prophet says in the Psalm, lest at any time God see us falling into evil ways and becoming unprofitable, and lest having spared us for the present because in His kindness He awaits our reformation, He says to us in the future, “These things you did, and I held My peace.”

The first thing to note is that in his earlier chapter on Obedience, Benedict begins: “The first step of humility is unhesitating obedience …,” which in his schema here does not appear till step three. So the numbering system does not necessarily denote a sequence of order, but is just a way of enumerating a number of different points. What Benedict is outlining is not an instruction for the undertaking of some task, as in: step one, then step two, and so on, which his ladder image might suggest.

Next is ‘fear of God’. We have a problem with this. Laura Swan points out that we would rather ignore God, than be afraid of God. She further points out that fear is a power thing, more suited to a God whose image is masculine. Such a God becomes for her ‘just another man to be afraid of’. In speaking of this in terms of our image of God and how we relate, Swan points us towards where we may need to go: perhaps we need, may even find, a better image; our images of God do impact on how we relate. Swan goes on to note that in the Hebrew Scriptures, one who fears God is one who is teachable, open to learning God’s ways. Such openness is a real first step in humility, for in it we recognise there is something we do not know. To begin our journey we need such openness, an openness which beckons us to leave all our familiar securities, all that we know, that we may go in search of what we do not know.

Benedict’s image in this first step is of a terrible, all-powerful and all-knowing Lord, who can call us to account. Though it may be crude and blunt, this image does call us to acknowledge that God is God, and that this God has a role in my life. We need a sense of something greater than ourselves. Coming to terms with this fearful image may uncover some of our own fears — those things which may be inhibiting our relationship with God. Perhaps I see myself as independent and self-reliant, able to look after myself, and so fear that, in allowing another into my life, my splendid invulnerability may be compromise. Or perhaps I fear that, in giving another a role in my life, I may be forced into a dependence on others, giving them a right to tell me what to do and what to think. So we begin to appreciate what the risks might be. Why would we contemplate risking anything? Because the isolation, that flows from our fierce independence, drives us. We need others; we are made for relationship — relationship with another, with others, and ultimately with The Other, God; inside us is an ache of incompleteness. As the Book of Genesis puts it: “It’s not good for man to be alone.” (Genesis 2:18) We are made not so much for independence as for interdependence.

If we can step over our difficulty with Benedict’s image, what we will see is a God who is very much aware of us. This is not an indifferent or otherwise distant God. This God wants to be in relationship with us, and what we do affects this relationship — as it does in any relationship. It is not that we have to do this and that, and not do something else, so that we might go to heaven, with failure to do so seeing us burning in hell for all eternity. This is language for children, much along the line of a parent saying, “You be a good boy now, or mummy will get cross.” Here, at the beginning of the spiritual journey, on the first rung of the ladder, Benedict does not hesitate to use childish language, language children can profit from, for those who are childish in spirit — and we all start from this place. Because it is written in this manner, it doesn’t mean that we who have grown in the spiritual life need to go back to being children again — much in keeping with those words in the Letter to the Hebrews: “Really, when you should by this time have become masters, you need someone to teach you all over again the elementary principles of interpreting God’s oracles; you have gone back to needing milk, and not solid food. Truly, anyone who
is still living on milk cannot digest the doctrine of righteousness because he is still a baby. Solid food is for the mature whose minds are trained by practice to distinguish between good and bad.” (Hebrews 5:11-14) We are meant to grow up. What Benedict is talking about is growing up. His whole schema is about growth. He is describing our process of maturing, so it’s not about what we have to do — provided conditions are not too detrimental, we just grow; things happen when they do; we don’t have to do anything. In outlining the process of spiritual growth, Benedict sketches out the terrain ahead, as well as the terrain already covered, that we might recognise where we are on our journey, and see that we have grown some, but still have some little way to go, and so know what to expect that we may co-operate with the miracle of grace that prods us to grow a little more. Humility is not a matter of ‘being humble’, as in something I do, but is something we grow into as we progress on the spiritual journey — trying to ‘be humble’ is like trying to ‘be tall’ (we can only grow tall; what we do won’t make us tall). We are not on the first rung of the ladder; we have been on our spiritual journey for some time. We do not have to go back to step one and cultivate a fear of some ‘Dread-Father’ God who will punish us if we are naughty; we no longer need this sort of thing to restrain our more selfish impulses as we did when we were kids. Then, in looking at his outline we might see, too, that perhaps we are stuck and not growing/flourishing as we ought, and so need to go and seek some help. This, too, is helpful. Like any process, the focus is really on its end point; so too here. It’s only when we have matured, grown up, that we are capable of entering the kind of relationship that God is looking to have with us. This is where Benedict is pointing. Our God is not looking for a relationship with a child. So, it’s not so much that God is looking to see if we’re doing the right thing, as looking to see if we are ready.

That “God is always watching us” should tell us that God is very interested in us, cares enough that he is always looking to see what we are up to. Further, this God is not just looking in some general kind of a way. This God is looking at ME; “I” matter to God. From here I can begin to see why I might do or not do something. I begin to appreciate that life is about more than me; I begin to sense there is something more to life than pleasing myself, and that in this something other lies my happiness. And so we begin to move on.

In portraying Benedict’s steps of humility as a growth process, I do not meant to say there is nothing we can/have to do, except just grow. It is not a passive, but rather an active process — much like the infant, who at that stage in its growth, only learns to walk by trying to walk; it is an experiential thing. So in the various stages of growth in the spiritual life, we have to learn to ‘walk in the spirit’ by having a go. Each stage has its own task, its own call to do what is needed to grow appropriate to that level. Here in this elementary stage, if what it takes to get us to have a go at ‘being good’ is a dread of hell or a desire for heaven and a fear of a God who rewards and punishes our every deed, so be it. (Rule of Benedict 5:3) Through our efforts to ‘be good’ we learn how to curb our more selfish impulses, an elemental necessity for growth to maturity. Eventually we will have reached a stage where will have so cultivated good habits that we are able to delight in virtue. (c.f. Rule of St Benedict 7:69)

The second degree of humility is that a person love not his own will nor take pleasure in satisfying his desires, but model his actions on the sayings of the Lord, “I have come not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.” It is written also, “Self-will has its punishment, but constraint wins the crown.”

Here we begin to respond. In the Prologue to his Rule, Benedict puts our call onto the lips of Christ: “Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?” (RB P:15) This step is our answering, “I do.” In this step we begin to curb our desire for control and our pursuit of pleasure for pleasure’s sake. He we set aside self-fulfilment in favour of fulfilling the will of another, of The Other, and discovering in this a fulfilment and a happiness that we have not known in just pleasing ourselves. It’s not that we are to have no will, as making God’s will our will. So we become oth-
er-centred, so we embark on self-transcendence. In the first step we saw that this God is turned towards us. In this second step we turn towards God (however vaguely we may understand what this means), making this Other, and not ourselves, the centre of our life, making him our God. Here we seek to align ourselves with God, do what he does. We want to enter into relationship with the God of life, that we may live.

So we set out on our quest: seeking God, and seeking to know his Will. This is what monks are about. Benedict's criterion for admitting someone to the monastery is: “Does he truly seek God?” (Rule of St Benedict 58:7) Genesis tells us we are made in God's image. On our quest, what we find is that the other side of the question, ‘Who is God?’ is ‘Who am I?’ In seeking God we find our self; in knowing who God is, I know who I am. My creation did not stop when I was born; I am not the person I was when I was born. Nor am I the person I will be when I die, the person I am to become. In between my birth and my death, in the getting of me from the one to the other, are all the decisions I make. It's as though I co-partner God in my own creation — if I choose to go this way, I will end up this kind of person; if I go another way, I become another kind of person. God leaves it to us; in a sense, our will becomes God's will. His call to us is simply our name: to me he says, “Steele, come forth,” and only I know what this means, though it may take me all my life to work it out and express it properly. (John 11:43) Our call is to be our self; the hardest part is finding the courage to be our self. This is the person we are to be; this is God's will for us. This call comes to us mediated through others; others challenge us — some to be our best self; in others we see where it would be best not to go. In our responding we come to know who we are, becoming more sure-footed as we go along and growing more confident about where we need to go and what we need to do to be our self. In a paradoxical way, in becoming other-centred, in letting others into my life, what I discover is not domination by others, but a grant of autonomy, in which, as I reach out and respond to others and The Other, what I find is myself, and in my response I learn how to be true to myself. The compass God gives us to help us find our way is our happiness. We might not always know what makes us happy, but we sure do know what makes us unhappy — here we learn “This is not me!” This is a part answer, albeit expressed negatively, to the question, ‘Who am I?’ As such, it tells us something about who God is. In it all, what we need to do is learn how to listen to our hearts, and to trust our heart's desire, for it is our desire for God; in following it we learn how to be God-like in this world.

A practical thing we can do here, in our efforts to align ourselves with God's will, is to open ourselves to God's Word, as revealed and handed on to us in Scripture. This is done most excellently through the ancient practice of lectio divina, that slow and prayerful reading of Scripture in which we try to take God's Word into our very self. Here we try to guide our life by what God says. Here we let God's Word challenge what we do, when what we do is at odds with that Word. Here we determine to Listen (a word which in Latin means 'hear and obey') to God's Word.

The third degree of humility is that a person, for love of God, submits himself to his Superior in all obedience, imitating the Lord, of whom the Apostle says, “He became obedient even unto death.”

On this third step, as Joan Chittister puts it, Benedictine Spirituality does not allow for fantasy. We are embodied spirit, incarnate beings. That which is in the realm of the spirit has to be made flesh, for it to be real; our spirituality has to be brought down to earth. So here the obedience to God, which we wrestled with in step two, finds concrete expression, is turned into real action. We are not called to a blind obedience, though, but to an obedience of one in whom we hear God's call. So Benedict urges us, using the words of the Psalm: “If you hear God's voice today, harden not your hearts.” (RB P:10; Ps 95:8) Benedict is not interested in mindless submission, nor in any kind of unhealthy dependence, but in a ready obedience to the God who comes to us in his Son. (Matthew 25:31ff; 24:46; Revelation 3:20)

On this step of Benedict's ladder of humility, we come to terms with the fact that we do not know everything, that sometimes others might be able to show us a thing or two — if we knew everything, we would not be
seeking, we would not be open, we would not be on our journey. Here we come to terms with the fact that other people have different ideas and different ways of doing things, which just because they are different to mine, doesn’t make them wrong. Here we have to come to terms with the fact that in some situations others may be charged with the responsibility for making decisions, and that with some of these I may disagree. Here we struggle with the reality of God’s will/God’s call — as it comes to us in and through others, and runs headlong into what I think and feel I should do.

In this step we wrestle with our will to power, which if left unabated will produce in us an arrogance that is at odds with our growth in wholeness and holiness and humanness. Here we have to cede to others a right to make a claim on us — teachers, spouses, supervisors, and so on — all those who have some authority over us, those whom we recognise as Christ for us in this moment and to whose voice we must listen. Here we learn that mutuality and interdependence is not about equal power-relations, nor about a reciprocal give and take. Rather it’s about sharing power, in which together we work out how to resolve our impasses in a way that calls forth the best in us both. This will require me to commit to the other, to sit perhaps for some time in the mess of it all with the other in an attitude of mutual respect that can only come from a listening stance. Here we learn that being strong-willed is not necessarily the way to be strong.

Our part in it, if we are the junior, is not just a passive acquiescence, but, as St Benedict puts it in his Chapter on Summoning the Brothers for Counsel, ‘to express our opinions with all humility, and not presume to defend our own views obstinately. The decision is rather the Abbot’s to make.’ (RB 3:4-5) What I think and feel is not simply ignored, nor do I simply ignore the demands others make on me — but sometimes I may have to sit uncomfortably in the tension. In it I do not lose my voice. Nor in it do I lose my power, for in it, it is I who must agree to do it. (Matthew 21:28ff) In it we learn to trust — that the one who asks seeks our good, that what is asked of us is for our good, and that my good is ultimately tied up in our good. (RB 68:5) Here we learn the value of allowing another to have a significant influence in our lives. So do we grow in faith, as our love of God and God’s love for us find real expression.

It is interesting to note that by the end of his Rule, Benedict is speaking about mutual obedience rather than submission to a superior, as here. (RB 72:6) If we keep on track with Benedict, this is where we are headed — this is in keeping with teaching of Jesus, who said to his disciples, “If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you should wash each other’s feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you.” (John 14-15) In Christ’s scheme of things, all superiors — those great in our midst, those to whom we owe obedience — are obliged to ‘wash the feet’ of their juniors. As we grow in humility, we’re ‘aspiring’ to become more Christ-like, till at last we are washing the feet of all. (We have to go up to go down!) In the monastery the highest superior, the abbot, holds this place in the community, the place of Christ, and about whom we gather. (RB 2:2; Matthew 18:20) The abbot, then, ends up the servant of all, obedient to all, for all are his juniors. (Matthew 20:26) The question then arises: who is obeying whom? So we speak of mutual obedience. So Benedict needs to remind the abbot that he, too, is under the Rule — he, too, is under obedience. (RB 64:20; Psalm 123:1-2) For, as we progress in this way of life, our obedience becomes more and more voluntary, and has less and less to do with compulsion and compliance, with no one there to enforce it. (c.f. RB P:49: 48:17-21)

As we advance along the way Benedict maps out for us, we will have learnt not to pursue what we judge better for ourselves, but instead, what we judge better for someone else. (RB 72:7) With each one doing the same, we begin to see what mutual obedience looks like. Obedience is set before us, not as a way of keeping order/maintaining discipline, but as a way of avoiding self-will, as a way of avoiding all selfishness; we, all, need to do this if we are to grow in humility and love. Our obedience is not to the superior as such, but to God in whose place the superior stands. All of us, superiors included, owe this obedience to God. (Psalm 123:2) The God-who-is-with-us, Emmanuel, has declared himself to be with us when we gather in his name. (Matthew 18:20) In our search for this God, as we grow in humility and come to have eyes for the human face of the God in our midst, the object of our obedience broadens from the ONE who represents Christ, the abbot, to the Christ in the MANY. When we have risen to such heights that we have become the servant of all, it is here that our obedience starts to manifest as obedience to the God in our midst. In this place we do God’s
will by doing the will, not just of another (as at the beginning), but of all others and so The Other in the gathering. Such mutual obedience, as we progress and begin to compete in obedience to one another, begins to look more and more like love for one another, where none are neglected. Thus our obedience, which may have been burdensome in the beginning, begins to lighten and we find ourselves able ‘to run on the path of God’s commands, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love,’ as Benedict puts it. (RB P:49; 7:68) To this Benedict beckons us.

The fourth degree of humility is that he hold fast to patience with a silent mind when in this obedience he meet with difficulties and contradictions and even any kind of injustice, enduring all without growing weary or running away. For Scripture says, “He who perseveres to the end, he it is who shall be saved”; and again, “Let your heart take courage and wait for the Lord!” And to show how those who are faithful ought to endure all things, however contrary, for the Lord, the Scripture says in the person of the suffering, “For your sake we are put to death all the day long; we are considered as sheep for the slaughter.” Then, secure in their hope of divine recompense, they go on with joy to declare, “But in all these trials we conquer; through Him who has granted us His love.” Again, in another place Scripture says, “You have tested us, O God, You have tried us as silver is tried by fire, You have brought us into a snare, You have laid afflictions on our back.” And to show us that we ought to be under a Superior, it goes on to say, “You have set men over our heads.” Moreover by their patience those faithful ones fulfil the Lord’s command in adversities and injuries: When struck on one cheek, they offer the other; when deprived of their tunic, they surrender their cloak; when forced to go one mile, they go two; with the Apostle Paul they bear with false brethren and bless those who curse them.

Life is never ideal. It is full of ‘difficulties and contradictions and every kind of injustice’. Running away is not the answer, for we just can’t run forever, and besides that, adversity will eventually catch us anyway. When it does spill over into our life, as it surely will, we can spend ourselves railing against it: “It’s not fair!” — and we’d be right; it is not fair. “Why me?” we cry. In a cartoon I saw, the reply from heaven was, “Why not you?” We can bash our heads against the wall of our own powerlessness, and only end up with a headache for our troubles. Until we come to terms with the fact that bad things happen, we only increase our own pain for no good end — but this we CAN do something about: we can stop bashing our head. We have to learn not to take adversity personally. Just as the abbot must hate the sin but love the sinner (RB 64:11), so we must separate our difficulty from our person. We have to learn to see adverse situations merely as invitations to find our way through them, without them causing us too much harm — and this may just simply be to hunker down, make ourselves as small as possible, to minimise our exposure; some things just have to be endured. In our enduring we learn patience. (Romans 5:3) In our patience we create space in which solutions can be found.

Life is never ideal. There is an old joke: “What is the most difficult thing in the monastery? Other monks!” As Laura Swan notes, we are all ‘under construction’: wounded, learning in our ignorance, fearful, anxious and frightened. As imperfect people we rub against each other, exposing our rough edges. Here we run into conflict. Here we have to learn how to keep alive our affection for the other as we work out our difficulties. Here we have to learn to confront injustice, and this can seem more terrible than learning to live with the pain of it. Conflict situations are never easy. Conflict situations, though, let us see our triggers; they are an invitation to grow in self-knowledge. In our refusal to let them hook us again, we gain a freedom — to respond in more creative ways. No longer thrown on the defensive, we can now listen, hear the other’s complaint, and so begin a conversation that works on its resolution. Resolving the conflicts may require courage, not just in facing the hostile situation, but also in what it may ask of us. We need to remain open, open to listen, open to respond.
So do we grow, become more. In our reconciling we mature; this enables us to go on together. Thus the bonds between us strengthen.

Life is never ideal. Sometimes we find ourselves in a situation where we just can't do it, and we can feel ourselves poorly treated in that this has been put on us. In his wisdom, Benedict included a Chapter on The Assignment of Impossible Tasks. At first, he says, just have a go — who knows, we may find a hidden talent! Then, if we find we really can't do it, at an opportune moment we are to let our superior know our difficulty. But, says Benedict, if he is still determined that we should comply, 'then the junior must recognise that this is best for him. Trusting in God's help, he must in love obey.' This is where we translate into reality those words of St Paul: “He became obedient even unto death.” Out of his impossible situation, Jesus' obedience won for himself, and for us, Resurrection to new life. Difficult situations are not bad; they're not good either — good and bad are moral categories. Difficult situations are just difficult, not nice, something we would not choose for ourselves; they are not bad. In them we learn how to sacrifice, if that is what is called for. Should we survive it, we gain from it. People who have come through adversity often gain a peacefulness, an acceptance, they would never have gotten without having gone through it.

Life's difficulties are always with us. On this step we learn to approach the difficulties that come our way with a quiet mind.

First off, this is not to be understood as 'Confession' as we know it; this is a later development.

The Asians have a wonderful virtue in which they try not to make another lose face. This being gentle with another is characteristic of the humble person. It comes unstuck, however, when we demand that another not cause us to lose face, when we claim it as a right, rather than receive it as a gift. When we lose face, we feel shamed; that's why we get angry; none of us like to feel shame. Our shame is tied to those parts of our self that we do not like. These we try to hide, showing to the world only our 'best' self. So we speak of wearing a mask. We can no longer be our self; we have to be someone else, someone 'nice'. This uses up a lot of energy that is not available to us to use more profitably elsewhere; the greater our sense of shame, the more depressed we become. These bits we keep hidden keep telling us that deep down we are not alright. This sense of shame keeps eating away at us, corroding us from the inside out. One author I came across refers to it as toxic shame, for it ultimately poisons us.

Like a deep-seated infection that must be lanced for it to heal, so the only remedy for our shame is self-revelation. Shame that is seen can no longer be hidden. This frees us from having to keep up appearances. The drunk who can no longer hide his alcoholism, often finds a sense of relief in that he no longer has to pretend. Only when we let our seamier side be seen can we see it for what it is. Only then can we do something about coming to terms with it, and learn how to manage it. It's a bit like illegal drugs. So long as they're illegal, we can do nothing about regulating their use and so minimise the fall out and the harm. In our self-disclosure we name our shame and own it. In so doing we have to admit to another, “I can't manage on my own.” This calls for great honesty; we have to step out from behind our mask — a huge step towards being able to simply be ourselves. In our honesty we invite the other's help, so that together we may explore my inner pain, the cause of why I do what I do. Here we may come to see a possible way, if not to liberation, then at least to where it is manageable and so no longer a huge problem. This I am called to embrace; so do I begin to learn to use my own power in my weakness.

The fifth degree of humility is that he hides from his abbot none of the evil thoughts that enter his heart or the sins committed in secret, but that he humbly confesses them. The Scripture urges us to this when it says, “Reveal your way to the Lord and hope in Him,” and again, “Confess to the Lord, for He is good, for His mercy endures forever.” And the Prophet likewise says, “My offense I have made known to You, and my iniquities I have not covered up. I said, ‘I will declare against myself my iniquities to the Lord;’ and, ‘You forgave the wickedness of my heart’.”
Self-revelation is not easy, for apart from our embarrassment, we take a great risk in letting our truest self be seen. It requires great courage and trust: we have to choose to believe that we are worthy of love and acceptance as an act of faith, and we do so in the face of our greatest fear, rejection. Great care must be taken in choosing the one to whom we make our revelation, for here we are very vulnerable. For the monk Benedict suggests the abbot, one who has walked this way of humble openness before us and knows how to walk it gently. We need to find one who has learnt compassion. In our self-disclosure we risk much, but we can gain more: the love and acceptance of ourselves as we are by a significant other. This we all crave, this we all need; it is worth the risk — for it is a powerful gift, one that is empowering. Through self-disclosure and acceptance we learn we are lovable, though we have this weakness — it’s just part of who we are, and that’s OK; no longer need we be ashamed. So do we come to peace with ourselves. Its cost is the humbling of our self — our taking a risk, trusting another in a stance of vulnerability. Here we see humility for what it is.

The sixth degree of humility is that a monk be content with the poorest and worst of everything, and that in every occupation assigned him he consider himself a bad and worthless workman, saying with the Prophet, “I am brought to nothing and I am without understanding; I have become as a beast of burden before You, and I am always with You.”

In the last step we had to let go all appearances from deep inside. This step deals with the externals, the physical mask we like to wear. We like to portray ourselves as successful, so we adorn ourselves with the trappings of success, that others might see how successful we are: the expensive watch, the designer label, the bigger office, the prestige car, the larger flat-screen TV, …

The trouble with things is that they can become addictive. The more we have, the more we want, or better, the more we need. As someone once remarked, “We either have no money, or not enough!” I have to keep on acquiring more. We are taught to do this. It is built into the fabric of our society. We live in a Liberal Democracy. The core Liberal values are life, liberty, and the ownership of property. When the USA was being established, Liberalism was beginning to blossom. Their founders sought to enshrine these values in their constitution as rights. Life and liberty were not a problem, but they worried about the third. For a poor person, who owned nothing, would be able to take his case to court because his rights were somehow being denied. So they changed it to read: the pursuit of happiness. Thus is uncovered our society’s core belief: ownership of property equals the pursuit of happiness; the more we have the happier we are. This is simply untrue. Rich people can be unhappy; poor people may have a hard life, but they can still be happy. Almost under any measure, we are better off than people were a couple of generations ago, and yet on the measures of happiness we are no better off.

In our race to be better (or, at least to be seen to be better) there are those others who also want to be seen to be better than the rest — and they want to be seen to be better than me. So I always have to keep a wary eye on everyone else around me, to make sure I can get in first and not let them get ahead. No rest to be had here either. Then there is always that other who comes along and who has the more expensive watch, who drives the better car, who has … more than me, then I am crestfallen. All my successes count for nothing and I am brought to nothing.

Here Benedict urges us to learn to love ourselves for who we are, and not for what we have. I am not what I have; I am simply a person who has things … for now. When I do not have, I do not cease to be. If we can simply be ourselves, then we are content with whatever we have … or not have. On this step we learn contentment.

The seventh degree of humility is that he consider himself lower and of less account than anyone else, and this not only in verbal protestation but also with the most heartfelt inner conviction, humbling himself with the Prophet, “But I
am a worm and no man, the scorn of men and the outcast of the people. After being exalted, I have been humbled and covered with confusion.” And again, “It is good for me that You have humbled me, that I may learn Your commandments.”

In this step we wrestle with our demons, as the monks of old liked to call it. These monks went out into the desert, following the example of Jesus who went into the desert, there to be tempted. (Mark 1:12-12) The monks courted temptation, not foolishly in the face of sin, but by trying to do good, there to discover their own inability — much as St Paul had found before them: “To will good works is present in me, but to do them is not. I do not do the good I want to do, but I practice the evil I do not want. … For I delight in the law of God in my innermost spiritual self, but I see a different law in my human bodily self warring against the law in my mind and capturing me by the law of sin that is in my human bodily self. Miserable man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:18ff) The monks of old went out into the desert to engage in this battle, and there found themselves wrestling with their demons.

These demons are those things in ourselves that bring us undone, despite our best efforts. We all want to do good, but this is not what always happens. Sometimes it is just in little things that are no big deal. Then there is the bigger flaw in our character, which we really don't like and do our best to keep hidden, do our best not to give it free reign, but every now and then it raises its ugly head and we find ourselves doing what we do not want — this the more so when we think we've got it under control and it hasn't troubled us for a while. This is our particular demon.

The desert fathers before us likewise had found they could not do the good they wanted to do. They had forsaken all to do this (this is what purity of heart is all about). They lived largely by themselves; there were no distractions. They soon learned what it was that brought them undone, and they were now faced with the reality of not being able to do what they came to do, that for which they'd given up all. They tried and they fell, they tried again and again and they fell — this is the original Impossible Task. In their despair they were tempted to flee. The remedy was always: Stay in your cell. There they had no choice but to turn to God for help (there was no one else), their very helplessness driving them God; there they found themselves humbled before God: “I can't do it!” In that place they knew themselves as they are: one who cannot always do the good, and so (in more traditional language) a sinner, no different from any other sinner. On this step we grow in self-knowledge, we learn that we are sinner and so one in need — specifically, that we are in need of a saviour, for if we are ever going to do the good we want to do, we recognise we are going to need some help. In our weakness we are lead to prayer: ‘Help me.’ Here the monks of old, alone in solitary prayer in their cell, found they were left with no choice except to put their trust in God: they had to take it on faith that God could and would help them to do the good they want to. This act of faith expressed itself in their getting up after each fall and trying again … and again. In so doing they set their hope in God. This is the way we open ourselves to being helped by God, and over time this grace does prevail. When the monks of old found that they were doing the good they wanted to do, they recognised it was God at work in them — for they knew how precarious was the road on which they walked (should God withhold his help, they knew they would fall again; they knew it wasn't up to them). “These people,” says Benedict, “fear the Lord, and do not become elated over their good deeds; they judge it is the Lord’s power, not their own, that brings about the good in them.” (RB P:29) In the struggle with temptation, they risked condemnation … but found mercy in God's help. In the struggle they acquired not only great humility (they knew exactly what they could do and not do), but also through the experience of his help, they gained an unshakable faith in God (he will uphold me). They became like the Old Testament anawim, those beloved poor whose only hope is in God alone, and to whose voice God was always attentive. In the recognition of God's help these humbled ones also experienced a great joy — much along the lines of Mary's Magnificat: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked on me in my nothingness … the Almighty has done great things — for me!” (Luke 1:46ff) So ‘they praise the Lord working in them.’ (RB P:30)
The humble person, then, is really a joyful man/woman of great faith and hope. To this Benedict calls us; we need such joy and faith and hope to go on.

The Self-knowledge we gain in this step is only painfully got, and it usually comes with tears. Here we feel the worst in the world — as St Paul puts it: “Miserable man that I am!” This admission hurts. To alleviate our pain we are tempted to kick the cat, so to speak: we see someone worse off than we are, weaker than we are, and we go over and sink in the boot, just to prove to ourselves that we’re not completely powerless, that “At least, I’m better than him!” This is the way of the bully.

Here, however, if we are willing to sit in our pain and let our tears cry out to God for us, what we will find is that our heart softens. Instead of kicking our weaker neighbour, we begin to understand their weakness and so learn to deal with them more gently. Instead of seeing ourselves as “better than”, we now see ourselves as “no different” — here we learn the wisdom of the words: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matthew 19:19) Treading cautiously around our neighbour’s weakness, we begin to treat them with respect as a person, as a person who merely happens to have a weakness. This kindness may even permit our crippled neighbour to get up and walk again, and perhaps even walk a little taller. Hopefully, in their encounter with us in our weakness, we will begin to notice their kindness towards ourselves (instead of being focused solely on our own failure — again!). So we learn to become more gentle with ourselves, and learn a little self-respect. Here we acquire compassion — compassion for others, and compassion for ourselves. As St Benedict puts it: “This then is the good zeal which monks must foster with fervent love: They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other, supporting with the greatest patience one another’s weaknesses of body or behaviour, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another.” (RB 72:4-6) This is what is to be got here.

I remember once meeting up with my mother after having been away for several years. I said to her, “I won’t kiss you as I have a cold sore.” She paused momentarily and then said, “I want to kiss you anyway.” This acceptance as we are teaches us that we are lovable — as we are in ourselves, just for being ourselves; we don’t have to do anything to earn it, to be worthy of it. We are just loved. Some years ago a huge 800kg hay bale fell on me. Afterwards I could not pray. It turned out that my problem was to do with my image of God, specifically of God as all-powerful. My questions centred round: Why did he do this to me? Why did he let this happen to me? I could not pray because I was afraid to draw too near lest he should throw another hay bale at me, so to speak. I knew something had to be wrong with my image of God, and yet Church teaches that God is all-powerful. It was not until I found myself sitting in the Church at our mother house in Ireland, looking at a stained glass window of the crucifix, that it occurred to me that this was the image of the all-powerful God, the God who says to us in Jesus on the cross: “I don’t care what you do to me. You can even kill me. There is nothing you can do that will make me not love you.” In the Resurrection this God says to us, “I am not going away; I’m not going anywhere.” The all-powerful God is a God who loves us so powerfully that it restrains his almighty wrath. (see John 3:16) We really are loved just as we are! We are made in the image of this God. Our quest for God is intimately tied up with our search for “Who am I?” (Jesus knew who he was, that he was Son, because he knew God as Father.) In coming to know who we are, we come to know who God is. On this rung of Benedict’s ladder, in coming to terms with ourselves as human, we come to know a gentler, more loving God. Here we begin to appreciate Jesus’ words more fully: “You know among the pagans the rulers lord it over them, and their great men make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you. No, anyone who wants to be great must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be your slave.” (Matthew 20:25-26) Here we learn a new way of being powerful and mighty, in a way that will not crush our frail humanity. Here we learn how, in our frailty, we might be an image of God in this world. Here we learn how to be ourselves.

The eighth degree of humility is that a monk do nothing except what is commended by the Rule of the monastery and the example of the elders.
Benedict started off in religious life as a hermit; he knew how difficult life can be by yourself. He ended up as abbot of a community; he found a way where even the weak can be strong. Along the way he discovered the advantage of learning from the experience of others who have gone ahead of us on this way; this he sought to hand on. He also noted that, in his troubled times, it was those who stayed put, those who struggled to hold together, who fared far better. Benedict wrote his Rule for what he call the strong kind of monks, the cenobites — those who placed themselves under a Rule and an abbot. (RB 1:12) This he is recommending here.

Here Benedict encourages us to acknowledge that others might know something. Failure to do so means we have to reinvent the wheel, so to speak. Trying to figure it out for ourselves condemns us to needlessly slow growth, as we grope along blindly trying to find our own way. It takes a long time to find out the secrets of life all by oneself. Instead, Benedict would have us accept that others have travelled the Way before us and have left us an account of what they have found, for us to follow. Humility here bids us to be open to what tradition might teach us. Human life hasn’t changed; what has changed is only the circumstances within which we try to live.

In this step Benedict would have us insert ourselves in good soil, so to speak, where we can and will grow, would have us join with others who likewise want to live and desire to see good days. (RB P:15) Human community is essential to growth and to growth in humility. In communion we find those who have been on the journey a long time and are still with us. From these we can get a first hand account of their travels thus far, and so we can avoid the pitfalls they themselves have discovered along the way; we draw water from a living well, draw from it an experiential wisdom that will help guide us to life. (c.f John 4:5ff) To gain access to this information, though, we must acknowledge that we don’t know what to do or where to go next, and so be humble enough to ask. This can be hard to do, especially when our question seems to be fairly basic, for in asking we risk being seen in all our ignorance. (John 3:10) As Benedict puts it: ‘Do not aspire to be called holy before you really are.’ (RB 4:62)

Sometime the answer we get may seemingly make no sense, or what we read may be hard to understand. This requires us to take it on trust that what we are told will take us further along the path to life that we seek. Because of this, prudence demands that we choose to read authentic, that the guides/mentors we select be recommended to us by their wholeness and holiness of life. There are many who like to have others hold them in high esteem, so they pretend to know and set themselves up as some kind of guru; at best they are only blind guides.

The ninth degree of humility is that monk restrain his tongue and keep silence, not speaking until he is questioned. For the Scriptures show that “in much speaking there is no escape from sin,” and that “the talkative man is not stable on the earth.”

I am reminded of a tale about a young man who approached a Zen master for guidance. The Zen master greeted him and set about preparing the Tea Ceremony. All the while the young man kept chatting on about what he had done and where he had been and who he had studied with and what he was hoping for. Meanwhile the Master had begun pouring the tea, and when the cup was filled he kept on pouring. The young man stopped talking as he watched the tea spread over the table and said, “Stop, Master! The cup is full; you can’t fit any more in!” “Just so,” replied the Master.

This is Benedict’s fundamental thought. Wil Derkse put it this way: “When I talk too much, I hear nothing.” Benedict is not interested in just an absence of words; what he wants is an attentive ear: “Listen, my son, to the master’s instruction, and attend to them with the ear of your heart.” (RB P:1) Noise, even if it is only the chattering of our mind, fills up our silence and erodes our attentiveness. The First Book of Kings tells us of the prophet Elijah’s encounter with God: First there came a mighty wind, but God was not in the wind. After the wind came an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. Then there came a fire, but God was not in the fire. After the fire came the sound of sheer silence. And when Elijah heard this he
went outside and stood at the entrance to the cave. And a voice came to him and said, “Elijah, what are you doing here?” (1 Kings 19:11ff) To hear this voice of the Lord calling in the silence we must first cultivate an inner silence that demands our ears be attentive. The silence we are to cultivate is that which silences all that distracts us from this.

In learning to be silent and to be comfortable in silence, we have to learn not to be so full of ourselves. We have opinions on everything, even on things about which we know little — one has only to listen to talk-back radio to know the truth of this. Often, when we talk to another, so eager are we to have our say that we really don’t listen to what the other is saying. We end up telling them what we think they need to hear, and the other hears only our arrogance. This is no basis for an open exchange; better to have said nothing. If we want to know what another is saying and so respond, we must first listen — and we can only do this in silence; silence is part of conversation.

In this step we have also to learn that others have opinions, too, and some are more learned than our own. Because another has an opinion different to mine, it doesn’t mean that I’m right and he’s wrong, and that I need to defend my right. Our shame in being seen to be ‘wrong’ is a major cause of much deafness. We need to get over this, and learn there is no shame in being open. We may even learn something! If another’s opinion causes us to question our own, they may do us a service by leading us to reconsider and so find a surer foundation. But we will never know if we never hear what they are saying.

In much talking we hear nothing, we do not grow, we remain where we are, for nothing can challenge us. On our part, in much talking we can rationalise almost anything we do, and no one can get close enough to tackle us. In holding forth we can convince ourselves that we really know, and so we can keep others at arm’s length for at best they only need to know what I know. Correspondingly, if we allow another to capture us and become their audience, we risk being talked into taking their position, which may be one of ignorance, prejudice or a demand for licence, so that the unacceptable becomes acceptable and we are left the poorer. Then, if our emotions get involved with our tongue, we can say things that should not be said, and hear things that wound — these things find their way into our silence and destroy it. Better to have said nothing. Then, too, talking is a great way of avoiding ourselves when our inner self wants to raise awkward or painful matters, in our quiet moments, and which we have been unable/refused to deal with but which we really do need to sit with. Idle talk is a great way to fill in time and fill up silence. Then, some conversations — gossip, smutty talk, and the like — do pollute, leaving us with images that may intrude into our quiet. In all these things we would do better to cultivate silence.

In silence, however, we do slowly come to a deeper wisdom through our being attentive and mindful in all that we do. In learning to hold our tongue and ponder we may be surprised to find we have something to say, something worth listening to, when another comes to us begging a word. Further, when that time comes we will know how to speak without disturbing the silence (so that ears remain open), for ours will be a voice given us in silence — not unlike like the Lord’s voice in the sheer silence, one able to challenge and set our neighbour back on the right path (when he or she has lost their way or lost their nerve); if he or she is able to hear what is said: “Elijah, what are you doing here?”

The tenth degree of humility is that he be not ready and quick to laugh, for it is written, “The fool lifts up his voice in laughter.”

Benedict was not a dour man. To understand what he is saying we need to distinguish, say, between humour and laughter. Humour helps us see life from a different perspective. Humour can help us not to take ourselves too seriously. It can help lighten a heavy load. It can help us to see ourselves when we are being pompous. Benedict is not against this. Derkse points out that ‘human’, ‘humus’, and ‘humour’ all share the same root stock. Humour helps keeps us in touch with the earth from which we were created and so helps us not get above ourselves.
Laughter, on the other hand, is born of derision, vulgarity, sneers, sarcasms or snide remarks — these things can be cruel. To laugh is to scoff. (Genesis 18:12) What Benedict is opposing is our laughing at someone or something. The humble person aims not to hurt, is one around whom all feel safe.

The eleventh degree of humility is that when a monk speaks he do so gently and without laughter, humbly and seriously, in few sensible words, and that he be not noisy in his speech. It is written, “A wise man is known by the fewness of his words.”

This just follows on from what we have been talking about. Here, we have learnt to stand alongside another without taking up all the space, as Joan Chittester put it. We don’t need to be the centre of attention, to dominate the conversation. We speak only what we know, without a need to defend it, and without a need to put others down who have ideas different to our own.

The twelfth degree of humility is that a monk not only have humility in his heart, but also by his very appearance make it always manifest to those who see him. That is to say that whether he is at the Work of God, in the oratory, in the monastery, in the garden, on the road, in the fields, or anywhere else, and whether sitting, walking or standing he should always have his head bowed and his eyes towards the ground. Feeling the guilt of his sins at every moment, he should consider himself already present at the dread Judgment and constantly say in his heart what the publican in the Gospel said with his eyes fixed on the earth: “Lord, I am a sinner and not worthy not to lift up my eyes to heaven”;

and again with the Prophet: “I am bowed down and humbled everywhere.”

Having climbed all these steps of humility, therefore, the monk will presently come to that perfect love of God which casts out fear. And all those precepts which formerly he had not observed without fear, he will now begin to keep by reason of that love, without any effort, as though naturally and by habit. No longer will his motive be the fear of hell, but rather the love of Christ, good habit, and delight in virtues which the Lord will deign to show forth by the Holy Spirit in His workman now cleansed from vice and sin.

In this last step language is a problem. Bowed heads and downcast eyes are these days probably more cause for alarm, than to be seen as something to be emulated. What is sought here, though, is an integrity, where what-you-see-is-what-you-get, where what we do is reflective of who we are. Here the person knows who he is, and is content to be just that; he or she is at home with him/herself.

In this step the person is back under the gaze of the all-seeing God, as was the case in Step One of the Ladder of Humility. Here the focus is more on the judging than on the seeing, so we are at the other end of the ladder. Here, though, the tone is different: “Having climbed all these steps, therefore, the monk will presently come to that perfect love of God which casts out fear.” Here we have arrived at that place where we were in in the Garden of Eden before The Fall. There the image is of us walking and talking with God in the cool of the evening. After The Fall, Adam says to God, “I was naked, so I hid.” But before The Fall he was naked, too, and it wasn’t a problem then (Genesis 2:25) —the difference is that now he FEELS exposed; he doesn’t want to be seen as he is, to be seen for what he is; now he fears rejection. It’s as though we spend the rest of our life trying to work up the courage to again stand naked before our God and say, “Here I am; this is me!” To do this we have to overcome our fear and risk rejection; that is why we see this ultimate encounter with God in terms of Judgement.
be able to do this is why we climb the Ladder of humility. Then, as one person noted, if we can be our self before the Judgement Seat of God, we can be our self anywhere; there is no longer any need for a false pretence hiding behind a mask.

“Having climbed all these steps, therefore, the monk will presently come to that perfect love of God which casts out fear. … All this the Lord will by the Holy Spirit graciously manifest in his workman now cleansed of vices and fear.” At the top (or is it the bottom?) of this Ladder something has happened, as if suddenly the climber, in descending into humility, has somehow been liberated. What has happened here requires us to take a brief excursion into ‘Secret Men’s Business’, to borrow a term from our Aboriginal countrymen — my apologies to the women; you will need to translate it into the female equivalent. Within the process of a boy becoming a man, the boy needs to be honoured, acknowledged, appreciated and approved in his endeavours, that is, he needs to be blessed unconditionally for what he does and attempts to do. Such blessing helps build his sense of competence and confidence as a boy; it contributes to his sense of self, his self-image, his self-belief, his self-worth and self-esteem. Now, on the threshold of manhood, the boy about to be a man needs, longs for, one more thing to complete the process. No matter how wonderful all his accomplishments and his sense of competence and confidence, there remains a nagging doubt, which if not addressed can cause a self-consciousness that perhaps may lead to sexual insecurity. What plagues him is: ‘Am I man enough?’ What the boy needs is the word and touch of the most significant person in his life — his father. Without it, the boy may never feel completely comfortable as a man. The touch of anointing and the word of proclamation by his father cause a change in the status of the boy’s being; it removes any doubt about his inner vitality because it gives witness to the passionate potency his father sees in him when he looks at, touches and so anoints his son. This final blessing marks the transformation from the status of a boy to the anointed and blessed status of a man. In it, it is as if his father is saying, “You are my Son, with whom I am well pleased.” For the boy-becoming-a-man such a statement marks the zenith of the father-son relationship; in many ways the son needs nothing more from his father. In his blessing the father transfers his confidence in his son to his son, and the son experiences confidence in his being, his maleness and in is masculinity. It is a real anointing, a transfer and installing of power and authority.

With this in mind, we have new eyes to look at what is happening in Jesus in that moment after his baptism by John in the Jordan — when the Spirit came upon him with power. We are told, ‘As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove, and a voice came out of the heavens: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”’ (Mark 1:10-11) Here Jesus is receiving his Father’s blessing. When a boy receives his father’s blessing, his father says to him, “You are a man now to do what you have to, just like me.” Here, though, Jesus’ Father is God. His Father’s blessing gives him the power and authority to be the divine man he is.

Since there have been fathers and sons, fathers have been giving their blessing to their sons from one generation to the next, empowering them as men; so with Christ. In the Easter event we commemorate Christ’s gift of his Spirit, when he breathed on his disciples and blessed them saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” (John 20:22) Here he is giving them the power and authority to be like him: images and likenesses of God in the world — which the Book of Genesis tells us we are made to be. (Genesis 1:26-27) In this blessing the disciples hear Jesus say: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” It is interesting to note that ‘Father’ was an ancient title for Christ, and from which we get the title Abbot, as in Abba. (RB 2:2) This blessing, Christ’s disciples handed on to their ‘sons’, and they in their turn to the next generation, down to this day, as they recognise and confirm the image of God formed in them and they come of age as Christians. Rituality we do this in the Sacrament of Confirmation — we really should make more of this event, this anointing and empowering with the Spirit of God, in which we say in the Spirit, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

St Paul tells us that in Christ there is neither male nor female. (Galatians 3:28) All of what I have said can be translated into language more suited for female ears; in the realm of the Spirit I do not claim any exclusive male blessing. In a similar way, Mothers in the Spirit will bless their daughters, though
using appropriate language. But it is the same blessing, for we are all children of God in Christ. There is room for difference, though, for, as images of God in the world, we are created male and female. (Genesis 1:27) So we can speak of male spirituality and female spirituality, which, though equal, are different. I find it interesting to note that Julian of Norwich used to refer to Jesus as ‘Christ Our Mother’ — she was obviously at home in her own spirituality. What I have outlined here is what I see as the male version.

St Benedict begins his Rule with the words: “Listen carefully, my son, to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it and faithfully put it into practice.” In a sense, the whole of Benedict’s Rule is designed to bring us to that point where we are able to listen, where we can hear our Father saying, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” When coupled with the words, “I don’t care what you do; there is nothing you can do that will make me not love you,” we are given a great freedom. As Jesus put it: “Everyone who commits sin is a slave. Now the slave’s place in the house is not assured, but the son’s place is assured. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:35-36) No longer need we worry about being put out of the house, so to speak; we have nothing to fear from our Father who loves us. For here we have arrived; we are at home. This is why there is no longer any concern about being before any Judgement seat.

Having received our blessing we are now ready to take our place; we are empowered. Now when our Father says, “Whom shall I send? Who will be our messenger?” (Isaiah 6:8) (while thinking to himself, “I know; I will send my son. They will respect my son.” (Matthew 21:37; see also 21:28)) we are ready to simply respond, “Here I am; send me.” (Isaiah 6:9) We can understand why, when Jeremiah tried to get out of what he had to do by saying, “Ah, Lord, I do not know how to speak; I am a child,” the Lord just brushed aside his objection saying, “Do not say, ‘I am a child.’ Go now to those to whom I send you.” (Jeremiah 1:6-7) Now we can understand why, when Jesus gave us his blessing, he did so saying, “As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.” (John 20:21) We are empowered!

To bring us to this point is the purpose of the Benedict’s Rule. Benedict refers to it as a ‘little Rule that we have written for beginners,’ (RB 73:8) and calls the monastery a ‘school for the Lord’s service.’ (RB P:45) At the beginning of his Rule, Benedict characterises the Lord as ‘seeking his workman.’ (RB P:14) In the School of Benedict the infant/beginner grows up to become ready to enter the Lord’s service as an adult Christian. This is the one for whom the Lord came looking. (See also Matthew 20:1ff.) In his farewell, Jesus said to his disciples, “I give you a new commandment: Love one another.” (John 13:34) This Jesus had said to them earlier, “Where two or three gather in my name, I am in their midst.” (Matthew 18:20) Love of God, love of the God-who-is-with-us, finds its expression in love of one another. This is the Christian way of loving God with all our heart and all our soul and all our strength. (Deuteronomy 6:3; Matthew 22:37) This is the Christian way of keeping the Law. (Romans 13:10) This is why Jesus can say, “By this love all will know you are my disciples.” (John 13:35) This is the task of Jesus’ disciple. Humility, then, is about becoming able to love. What enables us to love as Christ loves us is his Spirit come upon us, when we have received Christ’s blessing. This is why the early Church saw humility to be so essential. Far from being merely a virtue that can be practiced through repeated acts, it is a way of being that we grow into; it is a disposition, a way of being other-centred. For this we need to be adult Christians. The truly humble person is one who can love unselfishly. To this we are all called as Christians.

What does the humble person look like? Benedict gives us a picture in terms of Christian community. It is worth remembering that the most basic community is Christian marriage, where two gather in Jesus’ name — if this is your community, you may need to ‘photoshop’ Benedict’s picture. Humble persons, then, know who their Lord is — the Lord in their midst, the Lord who is with them — and are content to be his servant with nothing more than their service of one another to show for it. Such persons are happy to put their shoulder to whatever task is given them, whether it be leadership or more grunt-type work, and even in difficult circumstances, without thinking they deserve better; they are just happy to hang in there and pull together. With their fellow servants they are gentle, as they are on themselves. They know how to choose and weigh their words carefully, so they do no hurt and cause no harm. They are not afraid to speak up, and do so when called upon without putting anyone down or causing division. They are not afraid to admit their mistakes.
Should they find themselves struggling, they are not afraid to bring their difficulty to their Master, for they know him more as a loving Father than as some dread Lord — so they are unafraid to seek the advice and assistance of their fellows, just as they likewise make themselves available should others need to ask the same of them. In what they say and do they are reasonable. Such is the humble person, the co-worker of the humble Christ, and so one who can join with him in praying, “Our Father ….” Such persons have become like Christ, god-like in their humanity — and this is what we’ve always wanted, right from our first temptation; it just takes a while to figure out how to do it. Benedict captures well his image of the humble person in his chapter on The Good Zeal of Monks; it is worth repeating. “This, then, is the good zeal which monks must foster with fervent love: They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other, supporting with the greatest patience one another’s weaknesses of body and behaviour, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another. No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else. To their fellow monks the pure love of brothers; to God loving fear; to their abbot unfeigned and humble love. Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ.” (RB 72:3-11) Such a humble person is not unattractive.

Humility, then, is not a virtue — that idea weakens the significance of it, it becoming, then, just another thing we can do. Rather humility, as lived out by the early monks and described by them, concerns an essential experience in which we come to be in a state of humility. In Greek, the word for humility referred to a state of abasement, that condition in which one finds oneself flat on the ground. In Latin it became ‘humilitas’. This word shares the same rootstock as the word ‘humus’ — and from which we derive the word ‘human’. St Bernard was later to note that without abasement, there can be no humanity. So, humility is essential to our humanity, to our becoming truly human; it keeps us rooted in who we are. It is also properly a spiritual experience in that, in our relation to God, our being humble before God — being flat out on the ground before him — is our most primitive response to being in the presence of the divine, to our being overawed. It is precisely this experience that is described in the account of our Lord’s Transfiguration, when we are told, “The disciples fell on their faces, overcome with fear.” (Matthew 17:6) Our coming to be humble, to being fully human, is intimately tied up with our experience of God. Our being prone, then, at the feet of the God-who-is-with-us, so to speak, makes sense of and gives some context to Jesus’ use of his servant image in relation to humility. More importantly, though, it is there at the feet of the Lord-with-us that we are the more likely to encounter the Jesus who washes the feet of his disciples, especially as they gather for supper/Eucharist. It is there, in our encounter at the feet of his disciples, that Jesus will recognise in us his own humanity, a humanity that can carry/express/hold his divinity. Then he will give us his blessing, breathing on us his Spirit and in which we experience him saying, “You are my son, my beloved; in you I am well pleased.” Thus we are empowered to be a divine man/divine woman, like him, fit and ready to serve, where we can love and be loved. Here we have arrived at the status of a fully adult human, a fully adult human Christian — one fit to be in the presence of God, one who knows how to be in the presence of God. This is where St Benedict is wanting to leads us. This is what he is trying to outline for us in his chapter on Humility. Let us give him the last word: “Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.” (RB P:48-49)
In preparing this talk I found the following authors helpful:


